



Cairo, 3 November 2015
151104/01

S P E E C H

by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini at Cairo University

“Europe and the Arab youth: Shared history, common future”

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Ahlan Wa sahlan. Oraheb bekom gameean, Oraheb be shabab Masr.

[Good morning. I welcome all of you, I welcome the youth of Egypt].

I am sorry I will switch to English now, so much for my Arabic...

It is an honour for me to be here in Cairo – not only one of the great capitals of the past, of a glorious history, but a capital of today, of our times, and of the future. One of the great capitals of the Middle East and of the Arab world.

Egypt served as an example for many years, valuing citizenship above sectarianism. I take Alexandria as the example of a city that thrived in cultural and religious diversity, contributing to the world's cultural heritage. And Egypt is, today, the cornerstone of the region – in the Mediterranean and in the Arab world.

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But let me also say it is an honour to be at Cairo University, a world-class cultural institution, and the Alma Mater of three Nobel prizes. That is encouraging for your future...

I am glad I have the chance to meet so many young people today, and to represent the European Union here with you.

It is exactly one year since I took office in the European Union institutions, and some of you might remember there has been a little bit of scepticism before I started, mainly due to my age: too young, someone said. Well, indeed I am the youngest among my colleagues in the European Commission, and for sure within the leadership of the European Union. But I can tell you today: don't let anyone use your age against you. It's your strength. It's your energy. It's your capacity to dare, to dream, to hope, and not to stop if people tell you "it has never been done before, so you cannot do it".

As one of the greatest men of our times, Nelson Mandela, showed us: "It always seems impossible, till it's done". You can do it. The power of change needs the energy of the youth. And I know I can say this here, in front of really young people – not like me: at 42, you are not really young anymore... When someone tells you that you are the future – the future of your country, of diplomacy, of business, of engineering, of academic work, of whatever you are interested in – always remember that yes, you are for sure the future. But you can also be the present. Especially when the present needs energy and vision, as it does in these difficult times.

These are not easy times for this region – for our region – and for the world. Once again, we are confronted with forces that are trying to divide us. Some tell us that there is a war between Islam and the rest of the world. They tell us that Europe, "Rome", or the so-called West, are enemies to Islam and to the Arabs. And the same people tell us that Islam and the Arabs are enemies to Europe and to the rest of the world. They lie to all of us. They lie to Arabs and Europeans alike.

Let me be frank: there has been a time when, in the so-called West, many have fostered the narrative of a clash of civilisations. It was such a mistake, for so many different reasons. Today, the idea of a clash of civilisations has been taken over by Da'esh – terrorists who encourage sectarianism to expand their own power, who exploit divisions for their own interest.

But is that our interest? Is that the interest of European youth, and of Arab youth? I believe our common interest is rather the opposite. Our interest is defeating this narrative, wherever it might come from. And it is up to us. It is us also to you.

If you look at our history, at our values and our future – there are so many things that unite us. This is the real challenge today. Will we focus on what drives us apart, or what keeps us together? For how long will we let our differences define our relationship? For how long will we deny our common interests, following the easy but false rhetoric of a clash of civilizations, while so much in our history and our future unites us? There are so many reasons for us to stand together, in our history and in our future. There is so much we have in common.

This is what drives me here today: the hope in a common future for Europe and the Arab world.

I believe there are good reasons to be hopeful. I went to high school – when I was even younger than you – in Rome. Not far from my school, there was the building site of a new mosque. The mosque was completed a few years after my final high school exam: I watched it growing up. It is today the largest mosque in the European Union and in the “Western” world. Rome, the heart of the Catholic Church, is also home to so many Muslims. There is no contradiction in this. For centuries Europe has been home to Christians and Muslims, Jews and non-believers alike. Islam is part of Europe’s history. Islam is part of Europe. As well as Christianity is part of the Arab world, of Arab societies.

We share so much history, so much culture. You don’t have to be an historian to see that. You can just let the very simple, ordinary life facts tell you. Go to a pastry shop in Southern Italy, or in Spain, and you will be impressed to see so many sweets we have in common. And I think you understand me if I say *locanda*, *gonnella* or *robabikia*. Right? A great Egyptian intellectual you all know, Taha Hussein, once wrote: “The Mediterranean is not a barrier, but a bridge between civilisations. We are bond to Greece, to Italy, to France, as much as they are bond to us. We have had an influence on them, they have had an influence on us. It is only natural to keep these links”.

Of course the history of the Mediterranean is also a history of wars. There used to be wars between the two shores of the Mediterranean, as much as there used to be wars inside Europe, and inside the eastern and southern shore of the Mediterranean. Our history is a complex one. Even in this, we are similar.

Indeed, there have been dark pages, very dark pages. Dramatic ones. In old times, and in recent ones. But let me remind to all of us that even during the crusades, a dark era in our relationship, an Italian like me, Francis of Assisi – and I believe pope Francis did not choose his name by chance – came to Egypt to meet the sultan. In times of war, they talked about peace and faith. They chose to focus on what united people, not what drove them apart.

Today, what we share is much more powerful than the forces trying to divide us. We hold the same belief that all humans are equal – all the “children of Adam”, as the Holy Quran calls humanity. And we feel the same desire, the same aspiration for democracy, dignity, prosperity, and peace. This makes me believe that we don’t just share a long history: we can also share a common future. A future that will be as good as we manage to shape it, together.

Look at the world around us today. Europe and the Arab world have the exact same interests. We want a peaceful Middle East. We want to end terror, and to live free from fear. We want justice and dignity in our societies. We have the same nightmares, and the same dreams. We have all the right reasons to stand side by side, and face the current crises together.

From Libya, to Yemen, to Syria – these are dangerous times in the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean, for our region. These times call for the whole of us – in the region and in the international community – to come together, to work together. When we manage to do so, we also manage to achieve results that everybody considered impossible before. The agreement we reached with Iran last summer is one of these.

It is a deal that makes the whole region safer, and that is already paving the way for better relationship between Iran and all its neighbours – think of the unprecedented meeting we held in Vienna last Friday. For the first time, all relevant regional and international players, including Iran, sat at the same table. We discussed ways to start a political process and to finally solve the crisis in Syria, after more than four years of war.

So, in the short and medium term, this new atmosphere might help us address the current crises. And in the long run, it gives us hope that a more peaceful Middle East is indeed possible. A Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction – this is the dream of my generation, it can be reality for yours.

I know I can count on your questions and on the conversation we'll have in a moment, to discuss more in depth the most recent crises. But let me mention an older conflict first. A conflict we must always keep in mind – even when we start thinking that because it is the oldest, it is also the one we can manage more easily, or contain. Even when the eye of international media turns away – and this is often the case, and media only come back when people, often children, die again. I'm talking of the lack of peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

We must do all we can to end the violence. Ultimately, only with two States will there be peace. A strong, brave, wise politician like Yitzhak Rabin knew this very well: only a Palestinian state would bring peace, and only peace would bring security to Israel.

A Palestinian youngster of your age deserves rights and prosperity. The people of Gaza deserve a normal life. All this will only be possible with a viable, strong and peaceful State of Palestine.

The European Union strongly believes in this perspective. Ultimately, it is up to the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders to turn the page and choose peace. But we can all do our part to help them take the right decision. For this reason, the European Union has pushed to invite key Arab countries to join our Quartet meetings, as it has happened in these last months. All regional powers share an interest in ending the conflict – and today even more so, as the whole Middle East is in turmoil.

Tension in the Holy Places can only play in the hands of terrorists of all kinds. It can facilitate radicalisation and recruitment. It can reinforce their narrative of a war of religion.

On the other hand, think what peace in the Holy Land could do. Think of a pacified Jerusalem, a city for all the children of Abraham, a capital for two States. How sweet would that be... I know sweet is not a word we associate with the Middle East... We should. What a powerful message would it send to the whole Middle East, to the whole world. The message that living together, in dignity and respect of diversity, is possible and indeed beneficial to all.

Diversity is what makes the Middle East so rich, and unique. It's also what makes Europe so rich, and unique. It's our common strength. Da'esh wants to destroy all that. Dampen the colours of this region, and turn all the colours into black. We have a duty to preserve such diversity, and to help all minorities stay in their own land. Arab Christians have lived here for millennia. The Copts are part of the beautiful history of this country. And the same goes for Kurds, Yazidis, Alawites, Druze, for Shias and for Sunnis.

To preserve such diversity we need of course to fight and defeat Daesh. But at the same time, to fight and defeat Daesh we need to preserve such diversity. Their ultimate defeat will only be possible if we build open, inclusive societies and democracies. It is true for Syria, it is true for Iraq, it is true for Libya, it is true for all our societies, including the European ones.

Still, this is not just about politics. It is about culture and faith. Da'esh is putting forward an unprecedented attempt to pervert Islam. It is a movement that, rather than preserving Islam, wants us to trash centuries of Islamic culture in the name of their own fight for power. This is not glorious, this is simply destructive. Da'esh is not a friend but an enemy to Islam in

today's world. Its victims are first and foremost Muslim people. Islam itself is a victim of their despicable acts.

It is crucial for religious and cultural authorities to challenge the narrative of Da'esh. Al Azhar is playing an important role in this, and I am truly grateful to them. But this is also up to us, to you, especially the younger generations. King Abdullah of Jordan, speaking at the United Nations just one month ago, said: "Let's amplify the voice of moderation". Now, I know very well that the word "moderation" is not necessarily the most attractive one, especially among young people. But you can aim high, have strong feelings and beliefs, and be wise and rational at the same time. In our difficult times, actually, being brave and visionary means to invest in open, inclusive societies. Societies where everybody can find his or her own place.

The average age in Egypt is 25. I was told today – by several of the people I met – that there are over sixty million young people in this country. This is a young country in a young region. There is so much potential for change and development, so much energy. The real challenge is making the most out of this potential.

If we do not provide a future – and even a present – for our young people, they might seek... you might seek out those who promise alternative futures. Here as well as in Europe. So jobs and livelihoods are also a part of how we can defeat terrorism.

The European Union over the past three years has provided one million euros to young entrepreneurs and start-ups in Egypt, but also in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories. We have given to hundreds of them the opportunity to live their dream. There are many more creative minds here in this auditorium and across the region, just waiting to prove what they can achieve, what you can achieve. The key to our common future is our common capacity to give you the opportunity to make it.

This is about investments, and a proper business environment. But it is also – and primarily – about education. Everyone should be able to get the education they want and they need. Starting from girls and women. This is a crucial point when talking about women rights, but it is about much more than that, it's about the quality of our societies, of our economies, of our countries. And let me tell you: a country where women don't have equal access to education is not only less free, but much poorer and with a much poorer future.

Also in this, we are together. European women are still fighting for their own equality on many aspects. Not everything is perfect... nowhere. Youth unemployment in many European

countries is way too high. And our own societies are not always open and inclusive as they should. In fact, the current refugee crisis is putting us to the test. It is a test for our values, more than for our economies. It is a test for our internal and external solidarity. It is a test for Europe as a homeland of diversity, of inclusiveness, of opportunities for all.

There are people in Europe who are trying to convince us that a Muslim cannot be a good European citizen. They tell us that more Muslims in Europe – or more Arabs in Europe – will be the end of Europe. These people are not just mistaken about Muslims: these people are mistaken about Europe. Many European countries have large and integrated Muslim communities. Europe is strong when it is confident and open. And we do have all the good reasons for being confident and open.

Any narrative opposing “us” and “them” makes no sense at all, today: Christians versus Muslims; Europeans versus Arabs; migrants versus locals. It is not “the other” who will tear our societies apart: it is the fear of the other that can destroy our societies.

In these difficult times for our part of the world – our beautiful and difficult part of the world – to focus on what keeps us together, not what divides us. It is our responsibility to work for unity, mutual understanding and respect. It is our responsibility to build new partnerships between Europe and the Arab world.

We have so much in common. We face the same challenges. As I said, we have the same nightmares and the same dreams. We hold the same fundamental beliefs. We share a long history – it is up to us to build our future together.

Shukran, and may peace be upon you.
